

Remarks to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
Convention
September 17, 1998

Thank you very much. Thank you for the wonderful welcome. You know, when I was walking out the door this morning to come over here, Hillary said, "Where are you going this morning?" I said, "I'm going to speak to the IBEW." She said, "Boy, I like those folks."

I cannot thank you enough for your warm welcome and for the purpose which brings you to Washington. I would like to thank John Sweeney for many things, but I would especially like to thank him for the introduction he gave Carol Hooper, not only because he told us about her life but because he told us about the life of America at its best: people taking care of their families, being good citizens, doing what they can to improve their own lives and the lives of their fellow citizens. It was a very impressive account, and I thank you, Carol Hooper, for your introduction, for your support of this legislation, and for the work you have done for a lifetime in the IBEW. Thank you, ma'am.

I am delighted to be here with Jack Barry and Ed Hill and Rick Diegel. I am especially delighted, always, to be on the platform with John Sweeney. He has given new energy, new direction, real life, real power in the best sense to the labor movement here in Washington and throughout this country.

I was talking with our friends in Congress on the way out here this morning. It is wonderful to see the labor movement back, not only back in Washington but back in the heart of America. Average citizens who do not belong to unions know you are on their side, too, and it means a lot. And our country is better because of what has happened in the last 4 or 5 years.

I would like to say a special word of thanks to Senators Daschle and Kennedy and Harkin and Rockefeller and to Congressmen McDermott, Filner, Pascarella, and Meeks for being here with me today and for fighting for you every day. We need more people like them in the Congress. In a few weeks, you'll have a chance to send a few more like them to the Congress. I hope you will.

I also want to thank our Labor Secretary, Alexis Herman, our HHS Secretary, Donna Shalala, and my labor adviser in the White

House, Karen Tramontano, for not only coming here with me today but for working for you every day. They have really, really worked hard to change the daily life of the Government so that everybody is more oriented toward making decisions that have a positive impact on the ability of families to do their work and raise their children and live in strong and safe communities.

You've fought by our side for 6 years now, and we've got some pretty good results to show for it: the lowest unemployment rate in 28 years; nearly 17 million new jobs; the lowest crime rate in 25 years; the smallest percentage of Americans on welfare in 29 years; the lowest inflation in 32 years; the highest homeownership in history; and in just a couple of weeks, for the first time in 29 years, all that red ink on the Government's budget will turn to black, thanks to the people here, and I thank them for that.

We've also done a lot of good things to help the American people live their lives better. We raised the minimum wage, and I might say, we're going to be given a chance to do it again. Today Senator Kennedy's bill is coming up in the Senate, and he reminded me again before we came out here—you hear all these arguments about how the minimum wage will raise unemployment, all that sort of stuff they say. The minimum wage has been raised five times since World War II, since 1948; four of those times the unemployment rate was higher than it is now; and all five times, the inflation rate was higher than it is now. Twelve million people are out there working just like you, and nobody who works for a living—nobody—should have to wonder whether, no matter how hard they work, they still won't be able to provide for their children, educate their children, and have a decent life. It is time to raise the minimum wage again, and I think we ought to do it.

Together we doubled the tax credit for low-income working families, worth about \$1,000 in lower taxes today to a family of four with an income of under \$30,000. Together we've made college loans more affordable; we've given a tax credit for the first 2 years of college of \$1,500

and tax credits for the rest of college and for adults to go back to school. Together we passed the family and medical leave bill, and millions and millions of families are better off as a result of it.

Together we have fought against efforts, constant efforts in the Congress, to undercut worker rights. And I remember last May, particularly, the pride I felt in being given the opportunity by John Sweeney to work with you in California to get the message out that it is simply wrong to pass a ballot initiative to silence the voice of workers in the political process, and you prevailed, and good for you. I, too, want to join John in thanking our friends in the Senate for making sure that people know that at least on our side, we think it's wrong to pass a salting bill to erode the rights of workers to organize.

So these are good times for the country, and that's good news for America, and it's good news for American labor. But the question is, what are we going to do with the good times we have? All you have to do is watch the evening news or pick up the paper to know that these are turbulent times around the world, that things are still changing at a very rapid rate, and that the American people have a very stark decision to make, which is whether to sit back and relax, maybe even pass up a chance to vote on election day, or seize on these good times and say, "We thank the good Lord and our good fortune and your hard efforts for the good times we've got, but we know we can't sit on them. We know we can't relax."

When you have good times, you need to take the confidence they give you, the resources they give you, and look at the real challenges facing the country and meet them. We need to make this a season of doing things for you, not idleness and not indulgence but doing things for you.

The children in this audience are going to live in a very different world than we grew up in. We know right now many of the things we should be doing to make sure that world is a better, safer, stronger world for ordinary people in this country, and it's time we acted on it. That is the choice: partisanship over progress, people over politics. In every issue facing the Congress and the country, that is the choice. And the people need to make their voices heard.

Let me just mention a few of them. First of all, we need to dance with what brought

us to this prosperity. When I took office, we had a budget deficit of \$290 billion, high interest rates, low investment, and high unemployment. Now, we have worked hard to get rid of that. The members of my party, I am proud to say—and only the members of my party—in 1993 voted for an economic plan that reduced the deficit by 92 percent before the bipartisan balanced budget bill passed.

Now we're going to have a balanced budget and a surplus this year, and it is projected that we will have a surplus in the out years because of what we have done. That is a good thing. Now, what should we do? Some of our friends in the other party say that, "Well, we're projecting a surplus, and it's close to the election, so let's give everybody a tax cut," or "Let's give some people a tax cut," and as you might imagine, some more than others. *[Laughter]*

So, in just a few moments the House Ways and Means Committee will begin to mark up an \$85 billion tax cut to drain the surplus before it even shows up in the Treasury account. I've had a lot of interesting conversations about this. I have asked some of our Republican friends, I've said, "You know, we've been waiting 29 years for this. Couldn't we at least see the ink turn from red to black and then watch it dry for a minute or two before we get carried away?" *[Laughter]*

But it's election year, and it's popular. But it isn't right, and it isn't right for a couple of reasons. First of all, the world is in a lot of financial turmoil, and we need to set a standard for the world of solid, strong economic policy to try to get the world turned around, to make sure America's recovery is protected. And secondly, we've got something else that has to be done with that money first: We have to reform and save Social Security for the 21st century. That's what we've got to do. I have said over and over again that if Congress sends me a bill that squanders the surplus on tax cuts before we save Social Security, I'll veto it. *[Applause]*

Now, your clapping is an act of good citizenship. Why? Because some of you would get something out of that. But it's wrong. Why? Because when these children are in the work force and the baby boomers like me are retired, at present rates of participation in the work force, birthrates, immigration rates, there will only be two people working for every one person drawing Social Security.

Now, we have three choices. We can give the money away and fool around with it—or, we actually have four choices. We can do nothing, in which case we'll have two of our choices one of these days before long. We'll either have to lower the standard of living of our seniors rather dramatically, or we'll have to raise taxes so much to keep the system as it presently is that we will undermine the standard of living of our children and their ability to raise our grandchildren. And it's just wrong. I don't care how close it is to the election. It is wrong to do that until we have solved this problem.

Now, the other alternatives are, we can pass the tax cut and then just dismantle the Social Security system, and there are some who would like to do that. Or we can do the responsible thing even though it's election season: We can modify the Social Security system; and if we start now, because it's going to be several years before all the baby boomers get in the Social Security system—if we start now, we can make modest changes that will enable us to protect the retirement of the baby boom generation and protect the living standards of our children and their ability to raise our grandchildren. That is the right thing to do. It seems to me to be a no-brainer.

Now, it may not be popular within a few weeks of the election, but it is the right thing to do. And I ask you to say, "We don't care how close it is to the election. We care more about our children and our grandchildren and the dignity of life that Social Security has brought to so many. Half the seniors in the country today would be in poverty if it weren't for the Social Security system. We want to reform it in a sensible way and do it in a way that protects our children and our grandchildren. That's our position, and we're going to stick with it."

Now, the second thing we have to do is to do our part to try to stem and limit this global financial crisis you've been reading so much about that's affected Japan and Asia, that is running rampant through Russia today, that is threatening our best trading partners in Latin America who have good economic policy. I gave a talk about it in New York on Monday. Many people came up to me afterward, both Democrats and Republicans, saying, "America has to lead in this." We cannot be, to quote the words of the Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, "an island of prosperity."

About a third of our growth has come from selling things to other countries. Senator Daschle, who is as good a friend as working people have in the Congress, represents a State of farmers who are in terrible trouble today in part because the people in Asia cannot afford to buy the crops grown in South Dakota.

Now, that's what this bill funding the International Monetary Fund is all about. It doesn't throw money at people who won't help themselves. It says, "If you'll do the responsible thing to restore economic growth in your country, we'll be better off, and we'll help you, not out all by ourselves but working with others." It is very important. If we want America to grow, we have to be out there saying to our friends and neighbors, "We want you to grow, too. We don't think it would be a good thing for America to have a good economy and everybody else to have a bad economy," number one, because we don't feel that way and, number two, because eventually it will come back and bite America's economy. How many times have you seen that happen in the last 20 years? It's more true now than ever before.

Now, in this case the Senate has passed this bill for the International Monetary Fund. We're just a couple of weeks away from Congress going home to campaign, and we're still waiting after 8 months. And it needs to be done.

The third thing we need to do is to remember what the most important priority over the long run for America is, and that's the education of our people. We've opened the doors to college wider than ever before. If you look at all the things that have been done by this administration, working with our friends in Congress, it is literally true today that anyone who will work for it and deserves it can get a college education without going into so much debt they'll never be able to pay it off.

But nobody thinks that we yet can say that every child in America has access to the finest elementary and secondary education in the world. We've got a program within the balanced budget for smaller classes in the early grades, funds for States to hire 100,000 teachers to take the class size down to an average of 18, funds to help build or repair 5,000 schools, funds to hook up every classroom to the Internet by the year 2000. That's what we ought to be talking about in Washington, DC, something that will affect the lives of the children in this country.

The education budget needs to pass and needs to pass now.

Now let's talk about the subject that you're here to talk about, the subject that Carol spoke so eloquently about. We have come here to talk about health care. In 1996 you fought for and I signed the Kennedy-Kassebaum law so Americans can keep their health coverage when they change jobs or someone in their family gets sick.

Last year I signed a balanced budget bill that helps to make sure that 5 million uninsured children, virtually all of them in lower-income working families, can get the medical coverage they need and deserve—the biggest increase in coverage since Medicaid passed in 1965.

This year, we are fighting for the Patients' Bill of Rights. Why? You heard Carol's story; 160 million Americans are in managed care. These plans can save money and improve care. When I became President, health care costs were going up at 3 times the rate of inflation. That was totally unsustainable. It was destroying your ability to get a raise. It was undermining the fabric of the country. We had to do something about it. But like every other system, if the system becomes an end in itself and you lose sight of the purpose of health care, you get in trouble.

That is what has happened. I have seen too many people who have had medical procedures delayed or denied, not by their physicians but by health care bureaucrats because of the way these HMO's work. I've spoken to too many doctors and nurses who aren't able to give the kind of care they're trained to give. I've heard too many stories about parents rushing children to emergency rooms and wondering whether their health care plans will cover them in that emergency room.

I asked a bipartisan panel to develop a comprehensive set of rights for patients. I thank Bob Georgine of the Building Trades Council of the AFL-CIO for serving on that commission. They did a fine job. They were all different kinds of people from all parts of the health care sectors and all parts of the economy. They came up with a simple bottom line: the bottom line of health care must be to value patients. Medical decisions should be made by informed medical doctors, not insurance company accountants. Now, to do that, we've got to pass a Patients' Bill of Rights.

Let me just point out that there are 43 HMO's supporting this Patients' Bill of Rights. Why? Because they are doing the right thing anyway, or they want to do the right thing, and they know they're going to get the shaft when it comes to the bottom line unless everybody has to do it. But there are people in this business who know this is right.

Yesterday, as I'm sure you've already talked about, Senator Lott stopped the business of the Senate entirely, shut it all down, silenced all debate, just to stop Senator Daschle and Senator Kennedy with their allies here from bringing up this issue for a vote. Now, can you believe that? Why is that? Why would they shut the Senate down? Because when you go to an emergency room or an operating room or a doctor's office, nobody asks you whether you're a Republican or a Democrat. We all get sick. We all get in car wrecks. We all have kids that need help. So rather than get everybody on record, and put everybody on the bottom line, see who's standing up for the HMO's or the people, they just silenced the debate, because nobody wants to be recorded on the wrong side. So this is death by stealth. *[Laughter]*

Now, this is something that affects you and everybody you work with, everybody you see at your place of worship, everybody you see in all your recreational activities, everybody in your family. This affects you. This is a big deal.

Now, obviously, the real answer—we need more Senator Daschles and Senator Kennedys. We need more of these Congressmen here; we need more Senators like Senator Rockefeller and Senator Harkin. You'll have a chance in November to do something about that.

But this ought to be done now. This should not be a partisan issue. This is a case where Washington ought to work more like the emergency rooms and the operating rooms and the doctor's office. We could have had a Republican stand up here and give the same speech Carol did. This is not a partisan issue in America. It is only a partisan issue in Washington, and it is a practical issue in the country.

Now, I have done all I could here, and I'm going to do a little more today. We have extended the protections of the Patients' Bill of Rights to people in most Federal plans, in Medicare, in the Federal employees' plan. The Department of Health and Human Services has

now completed all the work on proposed regulations that will extend the protections of the Patients' Bill of Rights to 20 million Americans in Medicaid managed care programs, vulnerable children, people with disabilities, pregnant women that have no other way to get health care. That's a good thing to do.

With this action, we have now extended the protections of the Patients' Bill of Rights to health plans serving tens of millions of Americans. That's good. But what about the 160 million Americans out there whom I can't reach with unilateral action? That's why we have to have Federal legislation.

Even with all the State bills that have passed, because of Federal laws there are a lot of people they can't protect. If every State in the country passed bills, there would be 100 million people they couldn't protect. There is no solution to this but a comprehensive piece of Federal legislation.

For 9 months we have worked in good faith with people in both parties, and there are some Republicans—there are a few Republicans who are really supporting this. But they can't get by the kind of tactics we saw yesterday.

In July, under pressure from the public, the House of Representatives finally passed something they called the Patients' Bill of Rights, but it is hollow. It gives only a false sense of security. But at least they passed a bill. The Senate, they don't want to be recorded on this. They want death by stealth.

I want you to know the difference between our bill and the Republican bill that passed in the House and that has the support of the leadership in the Senate.

I've got a chart here and I think you can see it. You may not be able to read it, but you get the noes and the yeses, and I'll tell you what they say. *[Laughter]*

Our bill says that managed care accountants can't make arbitrary medical decisions that doctors ought to make, and theirs doesn't.

Our bill says you ought to have a right to see a specialist if you have a medical condition that requires one, and theirs doesn't.

Our bill says that in an emergency you ought to have the right to the nearest emergency room. If you walk out here and you walk across the street and you get hit by a car, do you want to have to go halfway across town if there's a hospital around the block? Let's deal with this in very practical terms; we're talking about

how you live now. Our bill says if you get hurt, you ought to be able to go to the nearest emergency room without worrying whether your health care plan is going to cover it, and their bill doesn't.

Our bill says if your employer changes health plans, you shouldn't be forced to change your doctor if you're pregnant, if you're in the middle of chemotherapy treatment. Now, you ever had anybody in your family treated for chemotherapy? You know how long it takes; you know how you go through the sickness; you know how you wonder if your hair's going to fall out; you know all those things. How much worse is it if, in the middle of the treatment, they say, "I'm sorry. We've changed plans. You've got to change doctors"?

Remember what it was like when your family had the first child? How would you have felt if you were 6 months pregnant or your wife was 6 months pregnant, and they say, "I'm sorry. You've got to leave your doctor now and go see somebody else. I hope you'll like him or her"?

This is real stuff. This is where people live. Our bill says that can't happen. That has happened in America. Our bill says no more. Our bill gives you that right to stay with your doctor through the prescribed period of treatment, and their bill doesn't.

Our bill makes sure health care plans don't give doctors secret incentives to limit care, and theirs doesn't.

Our bill protects the privacy and confidentiality of your medical records. Theirs actually makes it easier for other people to look at your medical records. You think about that. I don't think that's right.

Our bill says you ought to be able to hold your health care plan accountable if it causes harm, and theirs doesn't. And let me just talk a little about that. I've heard all this talk about how the last thing we need is another provision and another bill in Washington that gives anybody the right to bring any legal action. But you just think about it: How would you feel if I said, "You've got a constitutional right to worship God as you please. You've got a constitutional right to freedom of speech. You've got a constitutional right to associate with whomever you want. You've got a constitutional right to travel. But I really think there's too many lawsuits in America, so we're going to repeal your right to defend those rights. You

can't protect them. It'll be on the books all right, but if somebody throws you in jail for saying something they don't like, I'm sorry, you can't have any recourse"? There'd be a riot in this country, wouldn't there?

Look, in a lot of these cases where people really get hurt—I've sat here, and I've listened to all these stories; all of us have—believe it or not, finally the right medical decision is made by the HMO, but often it's too late. Why? Because they go up three layers or four, and the first two or three layers, the people there making those decisions—I've got a lot of sympathy with them—they're not doctors, and they know one thing: They are never going to get fired, demoted, or denied a raise for saying no.

You just think about it. When those files come in, they're never going to get in trouble for saying no. They're just like you; they want to keep their job; they want to take care of their kids. Nobody's ever going to burn them for saying no. But if they say yes, uh oh.

And what do they know; how do they sleep at night? Well, they know up the line somewhere eventually there's a doctor who's going to make a decision, and if the right answer is yes, he'll say yes—"so I better say no so I can keep my job and get my bonus, and I'll be all right." Now, that's the way this system works. That's fine if you've got something that somebody can diddle around with for 6 or 9 months. But what if you need a decision now or in 15 days or in 30 days? What if it's your family? That's what all this is about.

I'll say again, our bill covers every American. Their bill leaves out 100 million Americans. That's what this is about.

Now, I want to thank the AFL-CIO for the grassroots efforts you've made here. But I want

to ask you to intensify your effort. I want you to think about how this could affect your family. Even if you've got a plan that takes care of all this, just think about what it's like for 150 or 60 million Americans who have to live with these uncertainties every single day—to think you've got health care coverage, but maybe you don't, and it just depends on what happens to you.

The IBEW knows better. You have made a major contribution to the prosperity and recovery of America, and I am very grateful. Nobody could blame you if, after all the fights you've had to fight, you wanted to take a deep breath and relax. But you remember the issues I gave you today. There are decisions being made or not made here which will affect your lives in the near term and have a huge impact on your children's lives, none more immediate than this Patients' Bill of Rights.

So go out and fight for it. And tell America, tell all your friends and neighbors: This is not a labor issue; this is not a Democratic Party issue; this is about what kind of country we are and what kind of country we're going to be. I think you know they will stand with you.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:25 a.m. in the Regency Ballroom at the Hyatt Regency. In his remarks, he referred to John J. Sweeney, president, AFL-CIO, and the following International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers officers: Carol Hooper, Local 1690 president, who introduced the President; John J. Barry, international president; Edwin Hill, international secretary-treasurer; and Rick Diegel, political/legislative director.

Remarks at a Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Luncheon in Cincinnati, Ohio

September 17, 1998

Thank you very much. Maybe I ought to read Stan's talking points again. [Laughter] The only thing I didn't like about what he said was all that bragging he did on Bruce Lindsey. I'll have to live with that for the next year or two. [Laughter]

Let me say, first of all, I'm delighted to be back here in this magnificent home with a person who has been a true friend of mine and Hillary's. I want to thank Mayor Qualls and Chris Gorman for being here and for running for Congress at a time when public service is